With women in mind: Are they passive victims or active agents of civil strife? Reflections from the fast track land reform era in Zimbabwe.

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Abstract

The objective of this paper is to examine the extent to which women in Zimbabwe have been affected by civil strife and economic downturn. The paper seeks to show how in some instances women emerge as active agents in either perpetuating violence or positively responding to the impact of the civil strife to advocate for positive changes. Of interest to this paper are events emerging since the fast track land reform in the year 2000. Of great interest are such milestones as women's participation in the rejection of the 1999 constitution; the fast track land reform programme; the 2000, 2002, 2008 and 2013 elections; and women's participation in the inclusive government. These milestones and events have been anchored on, and sustained by women's organizations such as Women Coalition Zimbabwe and Women in Politics Caucasus Unity. The paper concludes by highlighting instances where women have as a result of limited choices been forced to dispel their problems by desperately getting themselves into illegal activities which in reality exacerbates the civil strife in the country.

Key words: women, civil strife, conflict, violence, active agents, fast track land reform.

1. Introduction

Devastatingly, the world has been subjected to varying degrees of civil strife resulting from civil disturbances. These disturbances have arguably been responsible for widespread protests against the socio-political and economic problems where women have often emerged as either victims or agents of change. It is however important to note that, the state of Zimbabwe's civil turmoil, disorder and treachery since 2000 has not left any woman untouched by suffering. This paper, thus, examines the extent to which Zimbabwean women have been affected by civil strife and economic downturn since the year 2000.

2. Definition of Terms

The term civil strife was defined by Schurink (1990) as referring to acts of civil disobedience which often involve rioting. Schurink (1990) also opinions that, the severity of the actions of the disgruntled individuals may lead to a public expression of displeasure. In most cases these expressions have often disintegrated into bitter conflict, heated and often violent dissension which is typically intended to demonstrate to government that displeased persons can make matters escalate into general chaos. The above view has been supported by Ikejiaku (2009) who also asserted that, civil strife as a term is commonly used in association with chaotic, violent, none unified actions related to a particular issue.

Often citizens not directly involved in the civil disorder may have their lives significantly disrupted, thus their ability to work, enjoy recreation and in some cases their ability to obtain basic necessities may be jeopardized. A typical example is the situation which prevailed in Zimbabwe in 2000 during the land invasions and in 2008 runner up to elections where the ordinary people were affected by the civil strife triggered by political instability.

Salelyan (2008) argues that it is critical to take cognizance of the fact that civil strife does not mean the same as war. In the Zimbabwean context, civil strife refers to the restlessness which prevails in the country since 2000 as a result of the perceived political threat triggered by the emergency of the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) as strong political opposition. The term civil was defined by Salelyan (2008) as referring to regional, national and local communities. However in relation to this paper civil strife is discussed from a national perspective.

An active agent is taken to refer to an individual who is completely engrossed in specific positive or negative activities. In this case, interest is on women who have found complete interest in pushing for the women's agenda in the face of the country's civil strife by consciously and critically participating in what they deemed to be activities with outcomes which could exonerate women from their disadvantaged positions whether it be socially, economically or politically.

3. Civil Strife in Zimbabwe

The civil strife in Zimbabwe ushered a number of civic organizations, among them Women in Zimbabwe Arise (WOZA), Women Coalition Zimbabwe (WCZ) and Women in Politics Support Unity

(WIPSU). For example WOZA is characterized by women who possess critical perspectives of their fellow women's situation especially in line with civil and human rights. According to Amnesty International (2013), WOZA promotes civil and human rights for all Zimbabweans. The group practices strictly peaceful and non-violent mobilization efforts. The most significant response by WOZA to the civil strife has been its struggle to bring positive change to the human rights issues in Zimbabwe. As active agents to the cause of human rights, Amnesty International (2013) highlights the dedication of WOZA leaders such as Jenin Williams and Mahlangu Magodonga who according to available reports have been arrested more than fifty times, yet they never gave up on their endeavours. The women's fortitude in the face of torture revealed the extent to which they possess critical perspectives on the civil strife situations prevailing.

The creation of the organization, Women in Politics Support Unity serves to reveal the degree to which Zimbabwean women have shown eagerness to be a part of efforts in involving women in the decision making platforms. This has been a move perceived as vital as it could contribute towards adoption of policies that could reduce civil strife in the country by dealing with issues from the standpoint of women. The significance of the groups such as WCZ and WIPSU was evidenced by the events following the roller-coast of Zimbabwe's political changes where the ruling party and the opposition sought to resolve the political chaos in the country. Info (2010) reveals that the 2008 global political agreement (GPA) recognized the importance of women in nation building by according women 16% representation in parliament. Although this may be argued to have been an insignificant representation, at least the women's organizations had scored some points in their aspiration. Therefore as active agents driven by passion and critical perspective, women in Zimbabwe at this stage significantly responded to the civil strife with enthusiasm and defied all odds. Another noteworthy outcome of women's endeavours was when, acting as active agents to the Zimbabwean civil strife women through the help and awareness from organizations such as Women of Zimbabwe Arise, Women's Coalition, were able to contribute toward the rejection of the 1999 draft constitution as the constitution was deemed to be insensitive to women's issues.

An evaluation of the activities that have been prevailing in the country since the year 2000, will show that Zimbabwe has according to Ikejiaku (2008) been faced by ongoing riots, violent demonstrations and communal clashes. Women were actively involved especially in the communal clashes were, just like their landless male counterparts become agents of the civil strife where they consciously and critically assessed their situation of being economically marginalized and willingly participated in the land inversions. Chingarande (2000) observed that some women joined in the land invasion on behalf of their absent husbands as shown by their willing surrender of their efforts to registration requirements, where they sent their husbands' names for the registration of the acquired land. While other women particularly the single and widowed stood their ground in the violent acquisition of pieces of land as they consciously realized the importance of having access and control of the vital land resources despite the horror they had to go through to acquire the land. From this discussion it therefore becomes perceptible that Zimbabwean women were active agents in the 2000 land reform programme, hence their 20% award of land. This was an award which was meant to close the gender gap in the country's agro-economy, calming down civil disgruntlement on issues pertaining to equitable access to resources.

Seabrook (1982) cited in Ikenjiuku (2008)'s classical writings emphasized the vital nature of the provisions of basic needs as a panacea for solving social crisis in developing countries. This view was also highlighted by Irobi (2005) who also concluded that, whenever the non-negotiable needs are not met conflicts and other instabilities such as law breaking and organized strikes become inevitable. Relating to the Zimbabwean situation as of 2008, the country succumbed to food deficit and general shortages of basic needs. It was as a result of such difficulties that most women in the country decided to join the bandwagon of cross boarder trading in an effort to secure food stuffs for their families. For those women who did not have the capacity to migrate to neighbouring countries they had to contend with long meandering queues for food supplies.

Although the dispute between ZANU PF and the Movement for Democratic Change was primarily political, the escalating violence quickly led to appalling levels of brutality against civilians (IRIN, 2008). Observations have been that women have been the most affected hence the decisions by many to flee to the Diaspora. This observation is supported by Salalyan (2008) who concluded that, civil strife and persecutions frequently generate population dislocation and mass refugee migration. In the Zimbabwean case, women joined the mass movement as political asylum seekers. Examples of women who voiced their concern with regards the deteriorating political and economic environment include Betty Makoni and Jestina Mukoko. They were taken to task for voicing their feelings and they ended up seeking asylum abroad. The Duo's decisions enhances the views by Moore and Poe (2003)'s views that political violence and persecutions are significant determinants of flights to other countries. According to IRIN (2008), the decisions by political victims to migrate to other countries often had some negative outcomes as most of these women ended up becoming victims of illegal economic activities in countries of destination leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. For Musingafi and Dumbu (2012), these women have unwillingly become sex slaves.

In response to brutality and abuse of women, women's organizations in Zimbabwe joined forces and advocated for an end to gender based violence. Info (2010) observed that during the 2008 civil strife, there was a massive women right violation as rape was used as a weapon against political opposition female activists. This drove WOZA into the streets demonstrating against the abuses. These abuses were synonymous to what Lewis (2013) argued to be orchestrated and systematic campaign of sexual violence unleashed against women, especially those supporting the opposition.

The hostile rhetoric from the ruling party contributed immensely to women's calculative immersion into the activities of the ruling party. This has however been a calculated move towards trying to secure protection from the brutality exerted by the party militia against anyone perceived to be from opposition. Therefore, all those women seen swathed in political regalia, dancing and ululating at party occasions do so out of sheer need than being intrinsically motivated to do so. The above supports the Marxist view on exploitation where in this case, the exploitation is based on the women's willingness to be exploited but to some extent executing their roles grudgingly.

Harley (2005) observes that women of colour have historically adapted to changes in their local environment, familial and social orders. Recent changes spared by economic meltdown have required women to create new strategies for ensuring their daily survival. This argument is in line with Ikejiaku (2009)'s analysis of the human needs theory which concludes that unmet human needs is a source of conflict and violence. In Zimbabwe efforts to prevent conflict outcomes have been characterized by women's spirited move from being victims to being survivors and being active in the informal economic zone. Literature regarding women's response to the civil unrest shows that women have responded to the situation with innovation and tenacity to survive the fluctuations in the markets and its attendance cultural and social shifts. In this regard Mark (2003) opinions that, the move by women has the potential not only to address physical needs but also to include non-physical elements needed for human growth and development and to participate in control over one's own life.

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that to a greater extent women in Zimbabwe have been active agents through mobilization and solidarity groupings to respond to the civil strife that has been rocking the Zimbabwean nation ever since the year 2000. Instances where women have been able to come up as groups to make visible their concerns were highlighted. Of particular interest to this paper were such women groups as WOZA, WCZ and WIPSU. Drastic responses highlighted also included instances where women joined the bandwagon of political asylum seekers in neighbouring and overseas countries. Unfortunately for those women who remained engrossed in the civil strife, some were too often forced to become part and parcel of the wrong on goings in the political zone. Thus all said and done it is the writers' view that, indeed women can be active agents who can rationally respond to a situation all in an effort to safeguard their interests and particularly the needs of their beloved ones.

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